

Take the Next Exit: New Views of the Iowa Landscape

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Take the Next Exit: New Views of the Iowa Landscape, edited by Robert F. Sayre. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2000. viii, 345 pp. Illustrations, table, maps, notes, index. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer Jan Olive Nash is co-principal of Tallgrass Historians L.C. In that capacity, she has visited and studied the history of Iowa communities for ten years. She is also working on a Ph.D. dissertation at Loyola University Chicago on the survival patterns of small midwestern communities.

Simply put, this sequel to *Take This Exit* (1989) is a good book. It's a collection of essays written by people who have opened their eyes wide to the often overlooked vernacular images of the Iowa countryside and small-town Main Streets. Where the earlier volume filled a gap in Iowa guidebooks—Sayre claims the last one had been the WPA Guide of the 1930s—many of the essays in the new publication go well beyond "guidebook" format, using approaches that range from descriptive to analytical to theoretical. In the late 1980s, *Take This Exit* was published in the midst of yet another farm crisis and at the threshold of a nationwide surge in heritage tourism. It showcased rural icons such as barns and the remarkable architecture of Mississippi River towns and conveyed basic Iowa history. Twelve years later, *Take the Next Exit* not only spotlights new places for the inquiring traveler, but also offers commentary on the impact of another decade of declining rural population, the use and abuse of history as tourism, and the growing localization of environmental concerns. Sayre wants this new book "to further promote intelligent tourism" of the Iowa landscape (3). It nicely accomplishes that goal.

Thirteen authors contributed 15 essays, grouped into four sections. The first section, Places of Customs, is a celebration of such common places and social spaces as the front porch and small-town cafés. Jon Spayde, for example, focuses an anthropological lens on Iowa cafés as both place and culture, deftly analyzing the rituals of food, talk, and décor to separate the "unselfconscious" (read "real") eatery from tea-houses and other restaurants-as-theater. Not unique to Iowa, such "places of custom" exist in communities throughout the country. Recognizing them is easier after reading these essays.

In the second part, Places of History, Nina Metzner hears voices from the past and suggests some of the history lessons to be learned from rural cemetery markers, and Patricia Eckhardt describes the churches that sit adjacent to many of these cemeteries. Architectural historians often focus on the exterior form and detail of monumental buildings, but Eckhardt determinedly, and with some wit, pushes through the portals to analyze the enclosed spaces and ponder the meaning of the paintings and sculptures she finds there.

Part three, *Nature's Places*, contains a section of color plates by Carl Kurtz that are, in a word, breathtaking. These photographs demolish the myth of a drab Iowa natural landscape. James Dinsmore, an expert on the state's lost wildlife, reports on the abundant opportunities for viewing healthy populations of snow geese, eagles, swans, and pelicans in the state; and Robert Sayre, true to his passion for finding important but ignored subjects, sleuths for Iowa's "lost lakes." He reads the landscape for physical evidence—"ponding" after a rainstorm, for example, or old drainage ditches—and reveals the documentary trails that lead to historic wetlands. Between the late nineteenth century and the 1950s, millions of acres of midwestern lakes and wetlands were drained to produce dry cropland. Faced with this awesome fact, Sayre concludes, "only the plowing up of the prairie had a greater impact on the landscape of Iowa and surrounding states" (208).

The tensions of life in a changing rural countryside, and the adaptations of people determined to survive them, are raised by both Mira Engler and Laura B. Sayre in the last section of the book, *Tourism, Commerce, and the Landscape*. Engler's essay, "Drive-Thru History: Theme Towns in Iowa," also exposes a shared thesis of the collection—that local, evolved, vernacular places reveal much about what is *truly* Iowan and *really* midwestern. Engler targets the heritage tourism efforts of a number of small communities and concludes that the efforts are for the most part unauthentic, commercial, and ultimately suicidal. "Theming" to attract tourist dollars, whether focused on antiques, ethnic backgrounds, or historic buildings, "reduces the environment into a single homogenous entity [and] inhibits diversity" (270). "Once independent of the consumer marketplace," Engler argues, "rural small towns now depend on advertising and on producing entertaining environments to survive" (274). Her alternative suggestions for creating "fresh relationships" between Iowa culture and landscape include recycling "abandoned farm structures—grain elevators, silos, and dairy barns— . . . as play structures, galleries, or public buildings in the midst of parks that feature the 'ruins' of farms" (275). How these fantasies are to be financed remains unanswered, as does the question of how they will benefit rural and small-town retailers or residents.

Laura Sayre's more encouraging essay, "Outstanding in the Fields," addresses the agricultural community's response to essentially the same economic dilemma. Sayre asserts that the "bright" side to the depressed rural economy is that it forces "everyone—farmers, consumers, legislators, scientists—to rethink conventional assumptions about farming practice and to make room for experimentation" (300).

Thus, a growing number of alternative farming operations have shifted from raising massive amounts of food for remote locations to raising healthier products for local consumers. Signs of alternative agriculture—including organic, sustainable, and community-based farming—abound in the countryside (look for manure spreaders). There are also signs that alternative farming may be restoring some vigor to Main Street, too. Small shops that sell locally grown produce, natural food stores, and small-town processors of organic products are becoming more frequent sights alongside traditional vendors of vernacular America such as the café and the hardware store.

Take the Next Exit serves up something for every traveler of back roads and unbeaten paths, but it is hardly the last word. The issues raised by heritage tourism and a changing agricultural environment are becoming especially ripe. Like all good scenery, the Iowa roadside is constantly changing. Thankfully, somebody is out there taking snapshots.

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